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Bright Futures progress check

By Michaela Saunders

WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER



KENT SIEVERS/THE WORLD-HERALD

College flags and banners on the walls of Yano Jones' classroom at Northwest High School remind students to think about their next step.

More than three years after philanthropists decided to spend millions of their money to help low-income children graduate from high school and college, students are beginning to benefit.

The local benefactors expect to spend at least \$4.5 million to \$5 million over the next 12 to 18 months. The funding will bolster private day care programs, put health clinics in schools and provide incentives for kids to attend class.

An additional \$2.2 million will fund a program to prepare promising low-income students for college.

Altogether, the initiatives will target thousands of students in the Omaha, Millard and Ralston school districts.

The plan is to expand each year and eventually reach out to all low-income public and private school students in Douglas and Sarpy Counties.

The two groups behind the effort — Building Bright Futures and the Bright Futures Foundation — will spell out their progress today at a 4:30 p.m. meeting at the Joslyn Art Museum.

Last fall, Building Bright Futures outlined lofty and broad initial goals: Within five years, every poor child in Douglas and Sarpy Counties will have access to health care, tutors and mentors and the opportunity to go to college.

Today, there's more structure behind those goals, and the groups are mapping out what they can realistically tackle each year.

“Now we have a clearer picture of who's being served, we're finding those gaps and filling those gaps,” John Cavanaugh, executive director of Building Bright Futures, said in an interview last week.

Not all youngsters who need help will receive it this year. The day care program, for example, may reach about 10 percent of the children it's aimed toward.

The programs will “never fully serve all kids in need,” said the foundation's executive director, Ken Bird, who called the last year “dizzying.”

But it's a start.

Before this fall, few students in teacher Yano Jones' class at Omaha Northwest High School realized the value of a solid ACT score.

Now they know that a good score can lead to scholarships and more college choices.

They are among 167 students at three high schools and Metro Community College enrolled in the foundation's college access program, the Avenue Scholars.

A key component is a daily class that teaches everything from managing a checkbook to finding help on an English paper at college.

Teachers called “talent advisers” lead the coursework and coach students outside the classroom. The foundation aims to pick advisers who come from backgrounds similar to those of the students. It also pays their salaries.

Jones, a first-generation college graduate, reminded the scholars on Wednesday to bring pencils and calculators to the ACT exam on Oct. 24. If you don't have a calculator, he told them, we'll get you one.

He advised them not to skim the reading section — you have to read every word and understand it.

“This is a gold mine,” Jones said of the program. “We're putting it all together. They're going to have the tools they need to be successful.”

Most of his students earn less-than-stellar grades but show motivation.

Senior Travon Smith, who turns 17 on Thursday, feels more confident asking teachers for help and managing his time after becoming an Avenue Scholar.

He knows he's been given a chance to do something — classmates ask how they, too, can join.

“They're going to help me further myself,” he said of the program.

Most of this year's investment on younger children will focus on ramping up the quality of child care for those receiving state-subsidized care. Such children are among the poorest in the metro area, putting them at risk of academic failure.

Building Bright Futures is recruiting large day care providers to agree to outside review and to comply with standards in exchange for funding and staff training.

As the overall effort continues, Cavanaugh said, it makes sense to coordinate with another local achievement movement: the two-county learning community council. No plans, however, have been formalized with the elected body so far.

Cavanaugh's group and the foundation have relied mainly on private funding. They plan to seek federal and other foundation grants when possible.

Both groups are collecting data to measure what works and what doesn't when it comes to helping children from birth through college and beyond, Cavanaugh said.

“We have a single simple goal of improving academic performance,” he said. “We have to do all these things.”

Contact the writer:

444-1037, michaela.saunders@owh.com

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